

OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, KING OF THE UNIVERSE

Today is the final Sunday of the Christian Year. Next Sunday will be Advent Sunday. In today's Gospel passage we read the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats.

"When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left."

This kingdom, which had been spoken about by our Lord in many of his parables, was a kingdom which was different from any the world had ever seen. It was a kingdom of charity, a kingdom of love, a kingdom whose least members would be valued and cared for. Therefore, at the conclusion of St Matthew's Gospel we have the story of the sheep and the goats. This seemingly simple story leads us to a profound meditation on the fundamental nature of the Kingdom of God on earth, the Church.

First of all, the Church is not just a humanitarian organisation. The Church is the Body of Christ on earth. It looks to serve Christ and to be Christ in every area of its life. Humanitarians are concerned with the good of their fellow human beings. This is wonderful. The world has certainly benefitted from the determination of so many individuals and couples who have given of their resources for worthy causes. God sees them and he will reward them.

Nevertheless, what we do in the Church is far more than humanitarian. We seek the very presence of the Lord in those who are hurting. When he tells the sheep that they will be rewarded or the goats that they will be condemned, the Lord does not just say that those who are suffering are important to him. Rather, he identifies himself with them. *"I was hungry; I was thirsty; I was naked; I was a stranger; I was sick; I was in prison."* Our charity is not just something we should do. It is our caring for the presence of our Lord in those with profound needs. We are Christians and, therefore, servants of the One who identifies Himself with the marginalised.

Again, we cannot be satisfied just with encouraging the government to care for all who are suffering. It is true that we must do that. The House of Bishops and individual clergy and lay people must run the risk of being accused of meddling in politics, which invariably comes from one particular section of the political spectrum, in order to demand that our government be just and moral. However, efforts to change the laws of our country do not supplant our responsibility to care for the weakest of our society ourselves. Whether our country is just or unjust, we must always be charitable.

Finally, we must respond to what we have received for the Lord. We have received mercy. We have received reconciliation. We have received acceptance as sons and daughters of God. It is a challenge for us to live out the gratitude we owe to God. We demonstrate our gratitude in the way in which we treat those who are abandoned in the world today.

What is sometimes called a preferential option for the poor is something we undertake not out of a sense of duty, but out of a sense of gratitude for the extraordinary gift of God's love. We receive love by giving love. We receive God's love by sharing his love with others, particularly with those people with whom our Lord has said that he is present in a special way.

The world today seems to be suffering from extreme polarisation. Each side sees little good in the other side and little wrong in their side. In the midst of all this we need to remember that our Lord calls us into the Kingdom of God. The way we need to identify ourselves is as authentic followers of Jesus Christ.

'At the end of life we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made, how many great things we have done. We will be judged by "I was hungry and you gave me to eat...I was naked and you clothed me...I was homeless and you took me in." Hungry not only for bread – but hungry for love; naked not only of clothing – but naked of human dignity and respect; homeless not only for want of a room of bricks, but homeless because of rejection. This is Christ in distressing disguise.'

Mother Teresa of Calcutta.